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INFO RUEHB/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 5876  
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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA IMMEDIATE 1422  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 001236

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM NP

SUBJECT: MAOISTS INTIMIDATE PRIVATE MEDIA IN NEPAL

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) The decision this week by a private Nepal media house to suspend publication of its two daily newspapers in the face of Maoist pressure has fanned concern among private news executives about threats to their editorial independence. Kamana Prakashan Samuha (Pvt.) Ltd., which has resisted outside Maoist pressure for the past seven weeks to unionize some its workers, announced June 19 it would suspend publishing its two newspapers, national daily "Nepal Samacharpatra" and its evening sister publication, "Mahanagar." In an off-the-record dinner with 14 editors June 20, including the publisher and editor of "Nepal Samacharpatra," the Ambassador warned that Maoist tactics against the Kamana newspapers were ultimately aimed at influencing content in Nepal's private media organizations. The editors glumly agreed with this analysis. End summary.

Newspapers Suspend Publication

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¶2. (U) Nepal media have given broad coverage to the decision on June 19 by Kamana Prakashan Samuha (Pvt.) Ltd. to suspend publication of its two daily newspapers, centrist national daily "Nepal Samacharpatra" (circ. 70,000), and its evening sister tabloid, "Mahanagar" (circ. 2,000). In a statement, Chairman and Chief Editor Pushkar Lal Shrestha said the firm took this "unpleasant decision" after newspaper distributors associated with an independent agency, Customer's Solution Ltd., pressured Kamana to permit them to organize workers under their Maoist-aligned union, the All Nepal Communication, Press and Publications Trade Union. The same union also recently organized workers in private Kantipur publications, publisher of Nepal's largest daily newspaper, "Kantipur" (circ. 150,000), and its English-language sister, "The Kathmandu Post" (circ. 30,000). In short, while Customer's Solution has a contract with Kamana to distribute its publications, Customer's Maoist Union is demanding the right to organize Kamana's workers, even though no members of that union are employed by the media company.

¶3. (C) At an off-the-record dinner with 14 editors June 20 organized by the Embassy's Public Affairs Section, Kamana

Chairman Shrestha outlined for the guests the pressure his newspaper has faced: Maoist unionists had prevented staff from entering the newspaper offices, papered Maoist posters at the building's entrance, chanting Maoist slogans, and, worse, made personal threats to his own life if he did not relent and permit the union to organize in his media house. Shrestha, in his June 19 public statement, said his firm opposed permitting the Maoist-affiliated union to organize Kamana workers (likely pressmen) because the union was affiliated with a distribution agency that was not part of Kamana. "Since the hawkers are associated with another agency the publications are not liable, on legal, moral and technical grounds for fulfilling their demands," said the statement.

Pressure? What Pressure?

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¶4. (C) Shrestha explained he met recently with Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka "Prachanda") and his deputy, Dr. Bhattaram Bhattarai, to complain about the Maoist-affiliated union's tactics and seek redress. He said the Maoist leaders claimed the tactics used to pressure Kamana publications were "not their policy." Trouble was, the editor said, the intimidation intensified after this meeting as the organizers were upset that Shrestha had consulted their Maoist superiors. The editor told the A/DCM that he also met with Home Minister Sitaula, who offered no assistance, and has tried repeatedly, without success, to contact the Minister of Information and Communications, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, a leading Maoist. The Minister was separately quoted in the media as saying this confrontation "is an issue to be sorted out between the management and

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workers."

¶5. (C) Concern at the dinner among the editors about Maoist pressure was palpable. The editor of "The Kathmandu Post," whose editorials often urge bringing the Maoist into the political mainstream by overlooking their many transgressions, agreed "100 percent" with the Ambassador's view that Maoist-affiliated union agitation against private media ultimately aimed to influence content. Others agreed as well. The editor of "Kantipur" noted his newspaper faced difficulties with the new union. He said his colleagues had even discussed bypassing the unionized distributors to deliver the newspapers to customers themselves.

Death Threats Issued

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¶6. (C) In a separate meeting June 14, Shrestha and a colleague detailed for the A/DCM the threats the editor had been receiving over the past seven weeks. Shrestha said Maoist-affiliated unionists had told him they would cut off his head; they also called his home to repeat the threat. He said his family was shaken. Maoists also planted a Maoist flag in his yard overnight. Shrestha was visibly concerned for his safety and said he had even considered leaving the country for a month or two. Post has urged him to detail his experiences to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and Shrestha said he has been in contact with the office. He said OHCHR told him it would issue a statement on the controversy on June 21, but this did not happen. Post has been in touch with OHCHR and urged it to investigate this case of obvious Maoist intimidation.

¶7. (C) Private media, particularly daily and weekly publications, have broadly covered the intimidation and closing of the Kamana dailies. Even state-owned "The Rising Nepal" (circ. 20,000), whose editor attended the off-the-record dinner, published an article (on page 6) on the controversy June 22. It reported, as did other media, that five publishers of Nepali broadsheets had gathered to

express concern over the newspapers' suspension and "urge the Maoist-affiliated trade union to follow legal procedures to have its demands met." Private media commentary has harshly condemned the union's intimidation tactics. The Federation of Nepalese Journalists, the Nepali Congress, Rastriya Prajatantra Party, and the Communist Party of Nepal-United-Marxist Leninist party also have condemned, or expressed concern about, the Maoist union's pressure tactics on the Kamana publications, media have reported.

Comment

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¶ 18. (C) Kamana's chairman-editor is viewed by some in the media as having once been pro-palace. We have heard that, as a result, there was a "he's getting what he deserves" attitude among some of his competitors. This is clearly shortsighted. As the Ambassador told the journalists at dinner, Nepal's private media played a key role in standing up to the King during Gyanendra's 15 months of authoritarian rule and the people's uprising in April 2006 that restored the Parliament. The Ambassador urged the editors to overlook competitive business impulses to jointly oppose Maoist tactics aimed at cowing press freedom. At least one editor told the A/DCM that it "was because of the lobbying there (at the dinner) that we got all the coverage this week." Coverage and commentary indicated many in the media understood that if independent news organizations did not loudly and collectively oppose this Maoist intimidation, they could very well face the same treatment. The question is: will they retain this vigilant attitude for longer than a few news cycles?

¶ 19. (C) A statement from OHCHR condemning such blatant Maoist-affiliated intimidation certainly would have been in order, too. Alas, we have not yet seen one. If such activity persists, and that is no doubt likely, the stakes for Nepal's free and independent media are clear. As the liberal English-language weekly, "The Nepali Times" (circ.

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15,000), stated in an editorial June 22, "Let's have no illusions: the systematic infiltration of private media by Maoist unions in the past weeks is about putting pressure on editors. It would be naive to believe this is only about legitimate labour rights. Editors who defied the royal junta's attempt after February 2005 to directly censor content say coercion by Maoists this time is much more insidious."

MORIARTY